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The Domestic Terrorism Threat in the United States:
A Primer

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Program on
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About the Author

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The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author, and not necessarily those of the Program on Extremism or the George Washington University.

Abstract

This briefing paper analyzes the history, ideology, and evolving methods of the radical far right in the United States.

Introduction: An Underestimated Threat

Since September 11, 2001, the threat of violence inspired by radical right-wing ideologies has been largely overshadowed by the “war on terror” and the extraordinary effort expended by both the Bush and the Obama administrations to thwart attacks by jihadists inspired by al Qaeda, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and other militant Islamist groups.¹

Now, however, policymakers and analysts both within and outside of government are questioning whether the balance of priorities should shift in the wake of a spate of high-profile attacks by white supremacists and similar extremists—most notably the June 2015 shooting at a historic African American church in Charleston, South Carolina, which killed nine people and prompted lawmakers to vote for the removal of the confederate flag from the statehouse grounds.

In October 2015, at an event hosted by the Program on Extremism, Assistant Attorney General for National Security John Carlin announced the creation of the post of Domestic Terrorism Counsel to coordinate cases arising from right-wing extremism, an acknowledgment that extremists weaned on radical homegrown, right-wing ideologies have killed more people in the U.S. since 9/11 than jihadis.²

Aside from the Charleston shooting, the more alarming recent attacks include:

- The April 2014 killing of three people outside a Jewish Community Center in Overland Park, Kansas, by a well-known white supremacist. The assailant, Glenn Miller, gave the jury a Nazi salute after he was convicted, saying that he looked forward to dying as a martyr; he is awaiting final sentencing following a recommendation of capital punishment from the jury.
- A June 2014 killing spree in Las Vegas in which a young couple, Jerad and Amanda Miller, shot two police officers and a bystander before turning their weapons on themselves. The Millers had previously spent time at Cliven Bundy’s Nevada ranch during Bundy’s standoff with federal officials over unpaid grazing fees.
- A former Transportation and Safety Administration employee’s June 2014 attempt to storm a courthouse in Cumming, Georgia, and take officials and employees hostage with an arsenal of guns, explosives, and smoke grenades. The attempt failed when sheriff’s deputies spotted him driving his car onto a sidewalk outside the courthouse. The former TSA employee was killed following a three-minute shoot-out with the sheriff’s deputies.

The immediate risk factors that give rise to such violence were largely identified by a 2009 Department of Homeland Security report pointing to the pressures of a depressed economy, the racial animus triggered by the election of the country’s first African American president, the fear—justified or otherwise—of legislation to restrict access to firearms and ammunition, and the

¹ For a critical overview of the billions spent since 9/11, see John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, *Terror, Security, and Money: Balancing the Risks, Benefits, and Costs of Homeland Security* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

² On the Department of Justice announcement, see, for example, Wesley Bruer, “DOJ Pivots from ISIS to U.S. Anti-Government Groups with New Position,” *CNN*, October 15, 2015. For data on deaths from foreign versus domestic extremists, see New America Foundation, *Homegrown Extremism 2001-2015*, August 2015.

large number of disaffected, highly skilled military veterans returning home from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, some of whom are attracted to and willing to act on extremist ideologies. The validity of these findings remained unaffected by the political firestorm that the report provoked and the decision to withdraw it under pressure from outraged conservative members of Congress.³

The economic collapse of 2008 and the election of Barack Obama gave rise to a spike in the number of hate groups around the country. The Southern Poverty Law Center counted more than 1,000 of them in 2011 and 2012; this number is now around 780.⁴ Most hate groups deal solely in violent rhetoric, not actual violence. However, it is clear these groups provide the background chatter that can provoke individuals to commit violent acts—much as they did in the 1990s at the height of the militia movement.

Unlike the 1990s, when the perceived threat was from small, well-organized groups like the Aryan Republican Army—which robbed 22 banks across the Midwest, or tight-knit radical communities like the Montana Freeman and Elohim City in eastern Oklahoma, many of the more recent confrontations and attacks have been sparked by lone individuals whose political zeal has often been offset by questions about their mental stability. Dylann Roof, the suspected perpetrator of the Charleston shootings, is a case in point: it is not clear if the racist ideologies he absorbed via the Internet fed a pre-existing mental disturbance and inclination toward violence, or if he was radicalized and acted, as has been alleged, out of a carefully considered desire to contribute to a broader cause.

Some analysts believe the proliferation of mass killings perpetrated by individuals of uncertain mental competency represents a new threat separate from the particular ideology—jihadist, white supremacist, or other—that fuels their actions. Others, by contrast, see a continuum between the more familiar radical movements of previous generations and the violence that has erupted more recently in their name.⁵ This briefing paper restricts itself to an analysis of the history, ideology, and evolving methods of the radical far right in the United States; it is for others to determine how each attack fits into or deviates from pre-existing patterns.

History

The history of the radical far right in the United States is inextricably bound to the country's fractious racial politics. The Ku Klux Klan began as a club for disaffected confederate veterans in Tennessee in the 1860s and mushroomed into the vanguard of white opposition to the end of slavery, the passage of the 14th and 15th amendments, and to the stationing of federal troops in the vanquished South. Almost every other radical group has followed in its wake.

³ Office of Intelligence and Analysis, *Rightwing Extremism: Current Economic and Political Climate Fueling Resurgence in Radicalization and Recruitment*, Department of Homeland Security (DHS), April 9, 2009, <http://fas.org/irp/eprint/rightwing.pdf>. On the furor, see Spencer Ackerman, "DHS Crushed This Analyst for Warning About Far-Right Terror," *Wired.com*, August 7, 2012.

⁴ Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), *Hate Map*.

⁵ For the broad outlines of this debate, see Andrew Gumbel, "Beyond Dylann Roof: Inside the Hunt for Domestic Extremists in the Digital Age," *The Guardian*, June 25, 2015.

The modern far right traces its roots to the immediate aftermath of World War II, when the armed forces were first integrated, the United Nations established its general headquarters on U.S. soil, and anti-communism became the driving political force of the early Cold War. These seemingly disparate phenomena were linked in the minds of radicals: all were indications that white Americans were losing ground to African Americans, Jews, and foreigners—and to ideologies that even the House of Representatives chose to label “Un-American.” A key text during this period was *The John Franklin Letters*, an anonymously published novel most likely written by a member of the anti-Communist John Birch Society in which a nightmarish U.N. takes over the U.S. government using a form of mind control introduced through the fluoridization of the water supply. The protagonist mounts an armed rebellion with his friends, stockpiling weapons at a remote rural compound and planning a series of increasingly grisly political murders.⁶

Many of the far right’s leading figures over the next several decades defined themselves in opposition to the John Birch Society, which they deemed too tame in its response to the growing power of the national security state and the rise of the civil rights movement. They formed groups like the California Rangers, Posse Comitatus, and the Minutemen, whose members flirted with violence to one degree or another; the Minutemen blew up a police station and attempted three bank robberies in the Seattle area. Among the early leaders of the movement were Richard Butler, who later formed the Aryan Nations, and William Pierce, who founded the neo-Nazi National Alliance and inspired the next generation of militants with his *Franklin Letters*-inspired novels *The Turner Diaries* and *Hunter*. Pierce said, “I quickly found out that the two topics on which I wanted an intelligent discussion—race and Jews—were precisely the two topics Birch Society members were forbidden to discuss.”⁷

America’s bruising experience in Vietnam radicalized the far right even further, breathing life into the so-called Patriot movement, whose members referred dismissively to the Zionist Occupied Government, or ZOG, and believed that only a return to the values of the American Revolution could save the country from its corrupt leaders.⁸ When the farm crisis hit in the 1980s, plunging entire rural communities into penury as giant agribusinesses took over family smallholdings, the movement briefly achieved a Robin Hood-style romantic appeal. Its folk heroes included Gordon Kahl, a North Dakota farmer who refused to pay his taxes, likened the government to Satan, and died in a shootout with federal law enforcement in Arkansas; and Wayne Snell, who left his farm in Arkansas to join the paramilitary The Covenant, the Sword and the Arm of the Lord, and hatched the first, abortive plan to blow up the Alfred P. Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City. Even more deadly was The Order, a group founded in rural Washington State by Bob Mathews, another hero to the American far right. The Order attacked a gay disco, a synagogue, and a porn theater in the Pacific Northwest; assassinated the talk-radio

⁶ See James Coates, *Armed and Dangerous: The Rise of the Survivalist Right* (New York, Hill and Wang, 1987), pp. 48-49.

⁷ William Pierce quoted in Leonard Zeskind, *Blood and Politics: The History of the White Nationalist Movement from the Margins to the Mainstream* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), p. 18.

⁸ See James William Gibson, *Warrior Dreams: Violence and Manhood in Post-Vietnam America* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1994).

host Alan Berg in Denver; and stole more than \$4 million from an armored truck in northern California.

The Patriot movement reached its zenith in the early-mid 1990s, as the end of the Cold War shuttered many defense industries, the country experienced a recession, and a resurgent militia movement cried foul at the growing paramilitary profile of federal law enforcement agencies such as the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms (ATF), and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The mishandling of two sieges in two years—first in Ruby Ridge, Idaho, where federal agents killed the wife and son of a survivalist wanted on a firearms violation, and then in Waco, Texas, where more than 80 members of the Branch Davidian religious group perished in a fire at the end of a 51-day standoff—sent the movement into a frenzy, sparking widespread calls for all-out war against the government.

A group of bank robbers calling themselves the Aryan Republican Army pulled off 22 heists in 1994 and 1995 and had ambitions to use the money to start a revolution. A skinhead from Washington State, Chevie Kehoe, killed the family of a suspected informant in Arkansas, and ended up in a shootout with Ohio police along with his younger brother, Cheyne. All these individuals moved in similar circles and attended the same gun shows as Timothy McVeigh, mastermind of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing that left 168 people dead.⁹

The Oklahoma City bombing was both a devastating expression of the movement's anger and a turning point. The sheer excess of the violence against civilians, including 19 infants and toddlers, brought talk of war to an abrupt halt and significantly cooled the militia movement's rhetoric. While McVeigh hoped to go to his death by lethal injection as a martyr to the cause, his image as a folk hero was overshadowed by Eric Rudolph, who bombed abortion clinics and Atlanta's Centennial Park during the 1996 Olympics and evaded federal authorities for five years before being captured in the mountains of North Carolina in 2003.¹⁰

The threat from the far right never went away—as attested, for example, by the 1999 attack on a Jewish Community Center in suburban Los Angeles by Buford Furrow, who married the widow of The Order's Bob Mathews—but the movement remained relatively quiet until the election of Barack Obama, America's first African American president, in 2008. Federal agents uncovered a plot to kill Obama at the Democratic National Convention in Denver that year, and the threats have continued more or less unabated since. One neo-Nazi magazine ran a cover picture of Obama in the crosshairs of a rifle, altered to look like a swastika, under the headline "Kill this NIGGER?"¹¹

⁹ A detailed account of this history can be found in Andrew Gumbel and Roger G. Charles, *Oklahoma City: What the Investigation Missed—And Why It Still Matters* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012).

¹⁰ On Eric Rudolph, see Andrew Gumbel, "Terror in the Woods," *The Independent (UK)*, June 5, 2003.

¹¹ The picture and caption were on the cover of National Socialist magazine. See Andrew Gumbel, "White Rage: The Rednecks Out to Kill Obama," *The Independent*, November 16, 2008.

Ideology

The radical far right is made up of multiple ideological strands, not all which are complementary. Some adherents follow a racist variant of Christianity, while others are uninterested in religion. Some hate African Americans and Jews equally; others, like Jared Taylor of the white supremacist group New Century Foundation, have no problem with Jews.¹² For many decades, the movement was unconcerned with Latin American immigration across the Mexican border. Now, for activists in California, Arizona, and Texas, the immigrant wave has become the primary issue.

Christian Identity

Christian Identity is an overtly racist radical form of Christianity which holds that whites are the true children of Israel and that all other races are either the spawn of Satan, originating with the coupling of Eve and the serpent in the Garden of Eden, or subhuman “mud people.” Christian Identity traces its origins to a late nineteenth-century movement known as British Israelism, but was first associated with the American far right in the 1950s when Gerald L.K. Smith, a former top aide to Governor Huey Long of Louisiana, moved to California and propagated a version of it to the budding white supremacist movement on the West Coast. Both Richard Butler of Aryan Nations and Robert Miller, the patriarch of Elohim City—a remote community in eastern Oklahoma which many of the criminals of the early-mid 1990s frequented—practiced Christian Identity. The exact theology varies from place to place. Some versions subscribe to the “twin seedline” theory, which holds that Adam was the first white man and the world was split into good and evil through the offspring of Abel, fathered by Adam, and Cain, fathered by the serpent. Another version, the “single seedline” theory, puts the split later, during the time of Jacob and Esau. Some advocates of Christian Identity have also postulated that a giant space battle between God and his angels and the forces of Lucifer resulted in a population of satanic dark-skinned “pre-Adamites” populating the earth before the creation of Adam and Eve.¹³

The ideological import of Christian Identity is more or less the same regardless of these details: it empowers white supremacists to view themselves as blessed by God and to see everyone else—nonwhites, multiculturalists, Jews, and so on—as touched by evil.

The Phineas Priesthood

Some Christian Identity adherents believe in, or aspire to join, an elite group of race warriors they call the Phineas Priesthood. Phineas is a figure in the Old Testament’s Book of Numbers who is so incensed by the marriage of an Israelite and a woman from another tribe that he skewers them both with a javelin in the name of the Lord. Adherents interpret this story as a divine license to kill interracial couples, and anyone else identified in the Old Testament as deviants and sinners, such as homosexuals.

The Sovereign Citizen Movement

¹² For more on Jared Taylor, see SPLC, *Extremist Files: Jared Taylor*.

¹³ For an excellent history of Christian Identity, see Michael Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

Sovereign citizens reject the authority of the federal government, most frequently when it comes to paying taxes, fines, or payments on credit cards issued by banks backed by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC). Sovereigns derive this belief from a misreading of the 14th Amendment, passed in the immediate wake of the Civil War to protect the rights of newly freed slaves. They believe the Amendment created an inferior form of citizenship they call “federal citizenship,” whereby the government granted itself excessive powers in conflict with pre-existing notions of state, or “natural,” citizenship.¹⁴

While the legal argument can be confusing—and, as presented in court from time to time, close to incoherent—it holds ideological importance, because it gives the Patriot movement a reason to see even basic documentation such as birth certificates, social security cards, and driver’s licenses as forms of government corruption and provides adherents with a justification to detach from mainstream society. The 2014 standoff that occurred when Nevada cattle rancher Cliven Bundy refused to pay his federal grazing fees was largely inspired by sovereign citizen thinking. A 2015 report issued by the Department of Homeland Security pointed to considerable potential for violence from sovereign citizens, especially when law enforcement agents or other officials challenge them at their homes, during traffic stops, or at government offices.¹⁵

The sovereign citizen movement was popular at the height of the farm crisis in the 1980s, as hundreds of thousands of family farmers were forced out of business and, in many cases, were looking for someone to blame. The movement also taps into the notion that Patriots are the true heirs of the American revolution and, far from deviating to criminality, are keeping to the true path as laid out in the original Constitution and its first ten amendments.

Terry Nichols, McVeigh’s coconspirator in the Oklahoma City bomb plot, was an adherent of the sovereign citizen movement: he maxed out his credit cards, sought to argue in court that the banks were guilty of “fraud and misrepresentation,” and, after losing his case, sabotaged any chance of leading a mainstream life. He later concluded he had been misled and regretted his involvement.¹⁶

Sovereign citizens continue to exasperate the court system. In one instance in early 2015 in Calhoun County, Alabama, Circuit Judge Bud Turner ordered his bailiff to find some masking tape and put it over the defendant’s mouth before deciding to have him escorted out of his courtroom instead.¹⁷

Neo-Nazism and Prison Gangs

Many American white supremacists fetishize Nazi Germany, its swastika flag, and other insignia, often in the form of body tattoos. Although a number of Nazis were allowed into the

¹⁴ An excellent analysis of the origins of the movement can be found in Richard Abanes, *End-Time Visions: The Road to Armageddon* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1998).

¹⁵ Intelligence Assessment, *Sovereign Citizen Extremist Ideology Will Drive Violence at Home, During Travel, and at Government Facilities*, DHS, February 5, 2015.

¹⁶ See Gumbel and Charles, *Oklahoma City*, pp. 177-78.

¹⁷ Eddie Burkhalter, “Judge Moves for Trials for Couple Charges in Sovereign Citizen Plot,” *Anniston Times*, January 28, 2015.

U.S. in the aftermath of World War II under secret programs such as Operation Paperclip, there is little or no continuity between the actual Nazi regime and those who, in the decades since, have used Nazi rhetoric and/or Holocaust denial as a form of rebellion against mainstream thinking and reinforcement of their own racist beliefs.¹⁸ Overtly Nazi-inspired attacks are similarly rare, one exception being the fatal shooting of a police guard at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., in 2009. The perpetrator, James von Brunn, was a Holocaust denier and anti-Semite who had a painting of Jesus Christ standing next to Adolf Hitler in his home. There may also have been some significance in his age, 88, which is often used by neo-Nazis as a numerical code for HH, or Heil Hitler.

The U.S. armed forces have a spotty record of weeding neo-Nazis from their ranks, despite attempts to crack down since the mid-1990s. A 2006 report by the Southern Poverty Law Center found that the operational pressures of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan superseded concerns about extremism. “Recruiters are knowingly allowing neo-Nazis and white supremacists to join the armed forces, and commanders don’t remove them from the military even after we positively identify them,” Department of Defense investigator Scott Barfield reported at the time.¹⁹ Extremists groups have often expressed an interest in recruiting former members of the military because of their expertise in handling weapons and explosives.

White Power gangs are rampant in American prisons and are a significant source of criminal behavior outside of prison—including the trafficking of crystal methamphetamine and other street drugs. However, most of the violence associated with these gangs tends to be related to turf battles and domestic violence, not extremism.²⁰

Methods

Since the 1960s, violent far right extremists have, with varying degrees of success, attempted to operate under a cell-type guerrilla structure to maximize secrecy and minimize the risk of infiltration by government informants. Often, however, they are been undone by a failure to adhere to those secrecy rules, compounded by what law enforcement officials have judged to be a considerable degree of operational incompetence.

One of the earliest paramilitary groups, the Minutemen, was intended by its founder, Robert DePugh, to grow into a network of small survivalist cells that could operate independently. But DePugh could not attract enough recruits—while he claimed tens of thousands of adherents, the FBI put the figure in the low hundreds—and the organization all but collapsed after DePugh’s

¹⁸ On Operation Paperclip, see Annie Jacobsen, *Operation Paperclip: The Secret Intelligence Program That Brought Nazi Scientists to America* (New York: Little, Brown, 2014).; and Eric Lichtblau, *The Nazis Next Door: How America Became a Safe Haven for Hitler’s Men* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014). On George Lincoln Rockwell, the founder of the American Nazi Party assassinated in 1967, see Frederick J. Simonelli, *American Fuehrer* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

¹⁹ David Holthouse, “A Few Bad Men,” *Southern Poverty Law Center Intelligence Report*, Summer 2006.

²⁰ For example, see Michael E. Miller, “Meth, Torture and the Grip of the Aryan Brotherhood,” *Washington Post*, June 10, 2015.

1966 arrest on firearms charges and a wave of arrests following a bombing at a police station in the Seattle suburb of Redmond two years later.²¹

Still, the concept of a multi-pronged revolution conducted by semi-autonomous cells never went away. Louis Beam, a leader of the Ku Klux Klan in Texas and a member of the Aryan Nations, popularized the term “leaderless resistance” in an essay first published at the height of the farm crisis in 1983 and reissued in 1992 in the wake of the Ruby Ridge incident. Beam was keenly aware that government informants had often been the undoing of the radical far right—he and other leaders of the movement had come close to being convicted on an unusual sedition charge in a 1988 trial based on the testimony of a former radical turned government witness. Beam took the term “leaderless resistance” from a former Army intelligence officer turned ardent anti-Communist, Ulius Louis Amoss, who wrote in the early 1950s that the CIA needed to encourage its operatives to work more autonomously because of infiltration by Soviet spies. Beam merely adapted this concept for the new generation of anti-government warriors. “Communism now represents a threat to no one in the United States,” Beam wrote in the reissued version of his essay, “while federal tyranny represents a threat to everyone.”²²

Many of the radical warriors of the 1990s met at gun shows—memorably described at the time as “Tupperware parties for criminals”²³—and fostered their relationships at remote compounds including the Aryan Nations headquarters in Hayden Lake, Idaho, and Elohim City, Oklahoma. Some attempts at leaderless resistance were more successful than others. The identity of the Aryan Republican Army bank robbers, who were firm believers in Beam’s ideas, remained a mystery until they made the mistake of recruiting an Army grunt who had been caught trading in military weaponry and was cooperating with the FBI as a way of reducing his legal liabilities.²⁴ Timothy McVeigh, by contrast, went to his grave without revealing the identity of the “others unknown” that the government suspected of assisting him in the Oklahoma City bomb plot. The full extent of the plot remains open to question to this day.²⁵

The secrecy inherent in the leaderless resistance model brought its own problems, as it limited the control that the broader movement could exert over individual actions. McVeigh was roundly criticized within the movement for what was perceived to be his decision, and his decision alone, to place the Oklahoma bomb truck beneath a daycare center instead of the federal courthouse next door. Many of his fellow warriors felt that killing toddlers and innocent civilians in a Social Security Administration office was a huge misstep, both morally and strategically. “The whole militia movement basically died that night,” Strassmeir commented years later.²⁶

²¹ See Stuart A. Wright, *Patriots, Politics and the Oklahoma City Bombing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 58-63.

²² Louis Beam, “Leaderless Resistance,” *The Seditonist*, February 1992.

²³ Kristen Rand, *Gun Shows in America: Tupperware Parties for Criminals* (Washington, Violence Policy Center, 1996).

²⁴ The Army grunt was Shawn Kenny. See Gumbel and Charles, *Oklahoma City*, 295.

²⁵ The federal indictment of Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols referred to “others unknown”. Many of the federal prosecutors also believed there were other unidentified coconspirators. See Gumbel and Charles, *Oklahoma City*, p. 328.

²⁶ Quoted in Gumbel and Charles, *Oklahoma City*, p. 65.

As the Internet overtook gun shows as the favored meeting place of like-minded extremists, the notion of cell-based guerrilla action began to give way to even smaller-scale, “lone wolf” operations. Buford Furrow’s 1999 attack on the Jewish Community Center in Granada Hills, California, was one example; the 2009 attack on the Holocaust museum another. While some of the far right see a tactical advantage in operating this way, the strategic value of the attacks has come to seem ever more dubious. The more individuals have acted on their own, the more questions there have been about the ideological coherence and even the mental stability of the assailants. By now, law enforcement specialists have come to believe they are facing a new threat: lone individuals with no significant history of association with the Patriot movement who adopt its rhetoric and methods to carry out attacks that, while seemingly ideologically motivated, express a craving for instant attention through the destruction of their own and others’ lives more than anything.

Future Risks

Kerry Noble, a former member of the 1980s paramilitary group The Covenant, the Sword and the Arm of the Lord who later became a campaigner against extremist violence, said in 1999: “I’m thoroughly convinced we’re going to have another domestic terrorist act in this country that is going to be beyond our imagination, beyond Oklahoma City.”²⁷ The triggers for such an attack are, unfortunately, very much in place: large numbers of disaffected, often traumatized former members of the military with the training and expertise to wreak enormous damage; an economy that, even on an upswing, continues to favor the few at the expense of the many, and fuels resentment; a political culture that allows room for hostility toward the government and barely veiled invective against minorities and immigrants; easy access to firearms, both legal and illegal; and a vast number of resources, many of them now online, to propagate extremist ideology.

Government interdiction efforts tend to be based primarily on correcting past security lapses. Bulk sales of ammonium nitrate fertilizer are now carefully tracked to make it harder to build a bomb like the one that detonated in Oklahoma City, and airport security procedures were transformed in the wake of 9/11. Anticipating and forestalling future threats is inherently more difficult and, often, bogged down by bureaucratic procedure. Additionally, security experts have a long history of making recommendations that are underestimated or ignored until an attack occurs.²⁸

The public’s best hope for avoiding a future large-scale attack by domestic extremists stems from the shortcomings of the radical movement itself. Many would-be revolutionaries are afraid that a big plot would attract the attention of government informants—a fear reflecting the ongoing efforts of federal, state, and local law enforcement to infiltrate their groups. There is also a

²⁷ Quoted in Gumbel and Charles, *Oklahoma City*, p. 1.

²⁸ The Federal Aviation Administration received repeated warnings before 9/11, including warnings about hijackings, but was more concerned about airport congestion than security. Likewise, it considered but rejected a proposal to ban boxcutter-type blades. See *The 9/11 Commission Report*, p. 84, 106. In Oklahoma City, the head of security for the downtown federal buildings had made repeated requests for tighter security before the bombing. See Gumbel and Charles, *Oklahoma City*, pp. 49-52.

relative paucity of disciplined, focused, ideologically committed individuals capable of seeing a large-scale plot through to completion. These factors are far from a rock-solid guarantee, however. Another “warrior” with the determination and discipline of a Tim McVeigh could materialize at any time.

In the near term, government officials and security experts are less concerned about a single major attack than about the extraordinary damage that can be done by individuals, like the white supremacist military veteran who killed six people and then himself at a Sikh temple in Wisconsin in 2012, or Dylann Roof, the suspected Charleston shooter. Although these assailants cannot work completely alone—they must acquire guns and ammunition and may leave hints about their intentions in Internet chatrooms—they are nevertheless difficult to spot because they tend to be isolated from the mainstream and often obtain their weaponry legally.

Law enforcement is still searching for an appropriate response to this kind of threat. Advocates of more robust policing of domestic extremists frequently complain about budgetary priorities, the inability of federal and local agencies to coordinate their efforts effectively, and the relative lethargy of police agencies in adapting their methods to the realities of the digital age. The Department of Justice and the FBI are, however, showing signs that they are taking these issues more seriously in the wake of the Charleston shootings.²⁹ Whether this leads to new legislation or a comprehensive reallocation of resources remains to be seen.

²⁹ For example, see Delphine D’Amora, “The Obama Administration Is (Rather Belatedly) Making Homegrown Terrorism a Priority,” *Mother Jones*, October 15, 2015.